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AN INTERVIEW WITH ZHAO LUORUI

KENNETH M. PRICE

ON MAY 24, 1994, I interviewed Professor Zhao Luorui at her home in Beijing. In a city brimming with highrises, Zhao's traditional courtyard home (with its lovely garden and extraordinary collection of Ming Dynasty furniture and books) exudes a sense of Chinese history and culture. Zhao is of course the foremost translator of Whitman in China. Her complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1991 by Shanghai Translations Press.

The beauty of the garden and the triumph of Zhao's translation should not blind us to the difficulties she has had to overcome. From news reports, from Zhao's graduate students, and from incidental bits of information she dropped in casual conversation, it was possible to reconstruct some of the broader contexts of the translation. Zhao studied for her doctorate while her husband, Chen Mengia, an internationally famous paleontologist, held appointments at the University of Chicago and Harvard. After their return to China, her husband—who was also the first serious collector of Ming Dynasty furniture, and a highly regarded poet (his works have recently been reissued)—was labelled a rightist (in part because of his opposition to the simplification of the Chinese character). During the Cultural Revolution, their home was marked and repeatedly ransacked; their furniture was stolen; photographs of Zhao's husband were destroyed; and her own book of manuscript poems was taken. Eventually eighty percent of the furniture and most of the books were returned, though her own poetry was irretrievably lost. (Some of the returned volumes now bear the stamp of the wife of Chairman Mao.) Unfortunately, Zhao's husband did not survive the Cultural Revolution. So when she says—as she does in an understated way in this interview—that her translation was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, she has hardly hinted at the enormous strength and character that were required to complete her monumental translation.

Professor Zhao's work offers substantial evidence of a renewed interest in Whitman in China. Her publisher, believing he had material that would sell, has issued in paperback a selection of Whitman's poems culled from the complete translation. And shortly after this interview was conducted, two aspiring poets at Peking University sought out Liu

Shusen (one of Professor Zhao's students), because these "poets to come" had heard that Liu is writing his dissertation on Whitman's poetics.

Price: When you studied at the University of Chicago [1944-1948], you found yourself in the midst of R. S. Crane and the neo-Aristotelians. Did your interest in Whitman begin in that unlikely context, among formalists who didn't think much of Whitman?

Zhao Luorui: You're right that the neo-Aristotelians and even the school of New Critics held Whitman in low regard. My dissertation was about Henry James, though I had a course on Whitman.

Price: Did that Whitman course lead to your translating *Leaves of Grass* into Chinese?

Zhao Luorui: No, my translation was an assignment. A committee of scholars in China decides what to translate and who to do it. I was known to be the translator of *The Waste Land* [1937].

Price: If you had not been interested in doing Whitman, could you have refused?

Zhao Luorui: No, one is not supposed to refuse.

Price: It must have been quite an honor to be asked. What year did you start?

Zhao Luorui: In 1962. But very soon afterward, there was criticism of humanism, so I couldn't do it. Then the Great Cultural Revolution followed. Of course I couldn't do it in those days. Actually in 1978 or even later, the publisher said to me "now you can start." This was after the death of Mao. I spent twelve years on it. I read all I could on Whitman, and I studied in the Regenstein Library [on a return trip to the University of Chicago] whatever books I hadn't read before. I met Justin Kaplan, and I called up others such as Professor [Gay Wilson] Allen. Professor Allen recommended that I read his article on the use of metaphor. I came to know Arthur Golden and others.

Price: James E. Miller, Jr.—you must have seen him.

Zhao Luorui: Yes, he was very helpful. He gave me copies of many Whitman books.

Price: Can you comment on the politics of your assignment, why Whitman seemed an important writer to translate at that moment?

Zhao Luorui: I think the Chinese people, even the government, always considered Whitman a democrat and a very good friend of the common

people. Before my translation, as you know, there had been Chu Tunan's *Selected Poems from Whitman's Leaves of Grass* [1955], and Li Yeguang completed the rest. They didn't have orders from any kind of committee—they just did it from their own interest.

Price: Could you describe what the basic differences would be for a Chinese reader who was interested enough to read both your translation and Li Yeguang's translation?

Zhao Luorui: I don't really know. I believe his translation is quite all right, though I must say I've never read it. I made a point not to read it so I wouldn't be influenced. Even now I've never read Li Yeguang's translation.

Price: I understand that Chu Tunan was a very high official in the Communist Party. Did he have a particular political interest in Whitman, an interest, say, in turning Whitman's love of comrades into something in line with Marxist ideology?

Zhao Luorui: Yes.

Price: Did he also have a tendency to single out the political poems of Whitman for special emphasis?

Zhao Luorui: No. I think Chu Tunan made the correct selections. He translated the well-known poems, though he never finished even those. He never translated "Passage to India," for example. He had a friend to check his English—a very well known professor from Peking University, Wang Minyuan.

Price: Am I right in thinking that Chu Tunan was fairly unusual among the top Communist Party officials in being an intellectual?

Zhao Luorui: I wouldn't call him an intellectual. He was chiefly interested in politics and public office. But I think he chose Whitman because of the poet's so-called advanced ideology. I respect him thoroughly. His translation is quite good from the present point of view, except that the dictionaries he used were old. He used some words and expressions from spoken Chinese that are not so popular nowadays, especially what we call those helping auxiliaries. He sounds a bit antiquated. But I respect him as a translator. When I did my own translation, though I never read Li Yeguang's, I read Chu Tunan's—and read every word of it—to see if I should follow him word-for-word or correct him.

Price: Were there a few poems that you felt were good enough to follow Chu exactly?

Zhao Luorui: Yes, such as "Tears" and other of the shorter poems.

Price: What did you find to be most difficult about translating Whitman?

Zhao Luorui: As I said, I started as a translator with *The Waste Land*. I found, as I told David Kuebrich [see *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1, no. 2 (1983), 33-36], that Eliot was easier to translate. Eliot could be done literally, word by word. The allusions—I looked them up. That's all. It was not extremely difficult to translate *The Waste Land*. And I did some of James's novellas, and I found them more difficult—the sentences are so involved—than T. S. Eliot. But I found Whitman the most difficult. I had to know the man before I could translate him. I didn't need to know T. S. Eliot to translate his poetry. But I did need to know Whitman as a man—his habits of thought, his background, his idiosyncracies even—in order to be able to translate him.

Price: In the course of translating Whitman, did you ever throw up your hands in despair and say that there are some parts of *Leaves* that are untranslatable?

Zhao Luorui: I had difficulties in translating certain sections of his poems, and I usually wrote to Professor Allen or Professor James Miller for advice. They would suggest possibilities.

Price: Is there anything in particular about Whitman's form that resists being rendered into Chinese? For example, the beginning of "Out of Cradle Endlessly Rocking" suspends the subject and verb until the very end of one long weaving sentence about what the man, recalling his boyhood, has experienced. When you try to render that in Chinese, do you do anything to try to duplicate the feeling that sentence produces?

Zhao Luorui: In that case, I usually cut the long sentence into many short ones. But I try to follow the order of the sentence, the tone, and the emphasis. There is no way of keeping the whole sentence together as one sentence because I must say that, though I want to be faithful, I also want my Chinese to be fluent. I wouldn't be so faithful that I become too involved and difficult for readers to understand.

Price: We've talked a bit about the difficulties of capturing Whitman's language and his rhetorical style in Chinese. Did you find it difficult to translate any of his ideas into Chinese?

Zhao Luorui: I think as far as ideas are concerned, there is not much difficulty. In fact, he is usually quite straightforward in ideas. With the *Four Quartets*, in contrast, the ideas were sometimes baffling to our readers—mystical, religious. (You know the Chinese are very practical people: we're not very religious.) I don't even think—perhaps people won't agree with me—I don't think there's any touch of mysticism in our philosophy, such as Confucius, Mencius, and the great scholars. Mysticism seems not a Chinese trait.

Price: What can you say about homosexuality in Whitman? I've had several conversations with people here—whatever the accuracy of their remarks—who have argued that Chinese people don't have much understanding of gay issues. Since this is an important matter in Whitman studies, I wonder what your thoughts are.

Zhao Luorui: I am very faithful: I translate what Whitman is getting at. I don't try to smooth over or suppress. I think, nowadays, we don't mind touching on the subject of sex. "To a Common Prostitute" is okay, and so are sections in "Song of Myself," including the one on touch. I think we accept those as privileges of an author.

Price: Was it Whitman's ability to treat these matters that made him a liberating force for writers such as Guo Morou and Ai Qing? Or did other things in Whitman move them?

Zhao Luorui: Democracy, I think. I suggested at one time to Li Yeguang that he write an essay on Whitman in China. He also wrote a useful biography and edited a collection of essays on Whitman. These works are quite good.

Price: My former student Guiyou Huang has also written an essay on Whitman in China for *Walt Whitman and the World*, a book edited by Ed Folsom and Gay Wilson Allen. These studies of Whitman in China tend to survey Whitman's reception in the past decades of the twentieth century. Are there also important contemporary poets influenced by Whitman?

Zhao Luorui: There is not much poetry in present day China—at least I haven't read much of it! It's not nice of us, I suppose, not to read modern literature, but in fact we don't. As scholars we don't go as late as the recent material.